

Interface? What interface? Reflexivity in linguistics research in multicultural classrooms

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In this paper, I want to consider the interface between linguistic ethnography and education, where that interface is represented by the relationship between the researcher and their classroom data. In particular, I want to argue that this relationship is complex: the interface is very blurred. The key issue I want to consider is that of reflexivity, which, I will argue, is an inescapable feature of research. I will briefly consider what implications this may have for our research. The reflections which follow are offered as a stimulus for discussion, rather than as a definitive or comprehensive position.

Linguistic ethnographic research in education is often concerned with processes of meaning-making. We live, however, in increasingly multicultural, multilingual societies. Our classrooms reflect this diversity. Heath (1983) clearly demonstrated the diversity of meaning-making practices in just two English-speaking communities in the US. The different practices children took with them into the classroom were implicated in the ways children fitted into and related to the school order. Many schools in the UK now have students from a number of different cultural and linguistic groups. This diversity presents a challenge for teachers. It also, however, presents a methodological challenge for researchers. To illustrate this issue, look at the following data extract [1]: what is going on?

73 Z come on speed up/ look at your writing it's going all wiggly// me do one/
74 ^(...)^/ now what
75 A err// I know/ pizzas/ (cheese and)
76 Z how about how about cheese pizzas/ vegetarian pizzas/
77 A yeah no/ um/ how much
78 Z cheeseburger
79 A alright then cheeseburger
80 Z no beefburger
81 A no that's too haram
82 Z no it ain't
83 A yeah it is
84 Z I eat beefburgers/ I ate/ once I ate ten (Monday) night
85 A you're you're you're you're you're an Englishman/ and you/ 'cause/
86 'cause um/ 'cause me (dad)/ um beef is haram/[it is
87 Z [trust me/ I never ate it/
88 trust me I never ate it
89 A you **little** liar/ (...)
90 Z cheese//
91 RB how many've you done *RB enters*
92 Z [...]
93 A [we done we done three/ we're gonna do three

What were you able to say? In using this extract in a session at the LEF meeting this spring, participants came up with a range of responses, from 'impossible to say anything' to elaborate accounts of the situation partially portrayed in the data. Several of the accounts (and the participants in the session) contradicted each other. Much of the discussion centred

around the word 'haram' (line 81). Some participants gave explanations of Islamic practices concerning forbidden 'haram' and permitted 'halal' activities. For some the word was unfamiliar. Others suggested that it was a mispronunciation or mistranscription. During the discussion, I provided additional information. Does it make any difference to your interpretation, for example, to learn that the two participants are Pakistani boys (aged about 10 years), or that they are learning English as an additional language?

The question I am interested in is: how do we make our interpretations? The diversity of interpretations of the data extract at the LEF meeting reflected the diversity of experience of those present. Participants' interpretations of the meaning and significance of the word 'haram', for example, appeared to relate in part to their prior experience of matters Islamic. My own experience of living and working in Pakistan, for instance, means that I have some sense of what 'haram' is about, although I also have an awareness that it is hard for me to appreciate its significance in, for example, issues of identity. Focusing on 'haram', however, is perhaps to exoticise the issue. As research by ethnographers of communication has shown, even our ways of interacting using (say) the English language are to some extent products of our cultural experience (e.g. Heath, 1983; Gumperz, 1982). The interpretation of both the content and practice of interaction are therefore contingent on the experience of the interpreter. These observations lead to questions concerning the role of the researcher in producing their research, and in particular, to the issue of reflexivity. My interest is in what might be called 'reflexivity practices', which form part of the process of making interpretations in ethnographic research.

Interpretative research, by definition, entails interpretation. What makes it research, is that interpretation is disciplined, framed, structured in some way. Nevertheless, making interpretations is not a mechanical process. The researcher is present, with their 'individual histories' (Bruner, 1996) and their 'research stories' (Webb, 2000). It is the presence of the researcher which leads to one layer of reflexivity, which, following Johnson (1977, p. 172), can be defined as "the mutual interdependence of observer or knower to what is seen or known". Whether, for example, you see the word 'haram' or not, whether or how you see it as relevant, or not, is interdependent with your prior experience of the word or matters relating to it. There is a reflexive relationship between who you are and what and how you see. This being so, what is the status of the claims we make about, say, multicultural classroom interaction? If my interpretations reflect my experience of the world, and that experience is very different from, say, the two students in the above extract, what validity can I claim for them? I do not mean to argue here that my interpretations have *no* validity; rather that there is a need for caution or a degree of circumspection in what I claim for them. As Duranti has observed:

"If one of the basic ethnographic questions is 'Who does this matter for?', we must be prepared to say that in some cases something matters for us, that *we* are the context... But such a recognition – and the reflexivity that it implies – cannot be the totality of our epistemological quest. Other times we must decenter, suspend judgement, and hence learn to 'remove ourselves', to be able to hear the speakers' utterances in a way that is hopefully closer to – although no means identical with – the way in which *they* heard them." (Duranti, 2000, p. 9)

As ethnographers, we are perhaps accustomed to 'removing ourselves'. It is therefore worth devoting some attention to Duranti's first point: what does it mean to say 'we are the context'? Let me explore this idea through an examination of a brief analysis of the above extract, originally presented at the Vigo International Symposium on Bilingualism (Barwell, 2002). My analysis draws on ideas from discursive psychology and conversation analysis. I will not give a detailed account of these ideas. I key aspect of my approach, however, is a

focus on the discursive practices the participants use, rather than on the meanings they make. I present the original analysis on the left, with comments concerning my interpretation on the right.

<p>Afzal first proposes that he and Zeb write a problem about pizzas (line 76). Zeb first considers different kinds of pizza (line 76) before proposing cheeseburger as the topic (line 78). Afzal accepts (line 79) put Zeb modifies his proposal to beefburger (line 80). Afzal rejects this suggestion on the grounds that “that’s too haram” (line 81). Haram is an arabic term used to describe ‘forbidden’ food in Islamic practice. In using the term <i>haram</i> Afzal invokes a shared identity with Zeb, an identity which includes familiarity with a language (the Arabic of Islam) and religious practices relating to food. Thus an implicit identity category is deployed, of which both students are members.</p>	<p><i>I set the task, drawing on my previous experience as a mathematics teacher. This informs my interpretation of what they are doing.</i></p> <p><i>The line numbers refer to the transcript, which I prepared myself.</i></p> <p><i>I speak English, so recognise rejections and acceptances.</i></p> <p><i>I draw on what I know about aspects of Islam, including from having lived in Pakistan</i></p> <p><i>The paper is about issues of identity. I have read about ‘identity categories’ and use the concept in my research</i></p>
<p>Zeb accepts the basis of Afzal’s rejection but argues with its application. He does not argue that <i>haram</i> is a criterion which is irrelevant for their task. Instead he argues that beefburgers are not <i>haram</i>. Indeed he backs up his case by citing personal experience, giving a personal account of eating beefburgers in the form of an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), “once I ate ten (Monday) night” (line 84). His use of an account of personal experience (“I ate”) and of an extreme case (“ten”) create a strong defence of his position that beefburgers are not <i>haram</i>. Zeb’s argument continues to draw on an implicit shared Muslim identity, since to claim that he ate ten beefburgers only works to support his claim that they are not <i>haram</i> if he is taken to be a practising Muslim.</p>	<p><i>I am citing other research to support and inform my analysis. This practice also makes the analysis more appropriately ‘academic’.</i></p> <p><i>After all, I have a career to think about.</i></p>
<p>Afzal seeks to reject Zeb’s defence, drawing on an explicit identity category for the first time, “you’re an Englishman” (line 85). The categorisation of Zeb as an Englishman sets up a contrast between Englishmen and the category of practising Muslims that has been implicit in the two students’ preceding discussion. Thus an Englishman, in this case is <i>not</i> a practising Muslim. Afzal sets up and deploys this contrast as a way of challenging Zeb’s idea for the word problem. He therefore uses identity categories as a means to prevail over Zeb. In so doing, he relies on</p>	<p><i>As I speak English, I recognise the force of Zeb’s remark, marking it (for me) as an interesting moment in the interaction. It makes me laugh.</i></p>

a shared set of experiences, so uniting the two students. At the same time, he uses these shared experiences to attack Zeb, so marking a division between them. In this case his argument is successful as Zeb retracts his earlier account (lines 87-88), allowing Afzal to reinforce his dominant position “you **little liar**” (line 89).

My analysis is designed to support an argument concerning the role of identity in mathematics classrooms involving bilingual students. I am interested in this topic since I aim through my research to promote equity in education and improve the teaching of bilingual students.

Returning to Duranti’s observation, then, my examination of my analysis suggests several ways in which I am part of the context of my analysis:

- I set the students’ work
- I am conducting the research
- I am interested in issues of identity
- I made the transcription
- I speak English
- I have been a teacher
- I have taught mathematics
- I have lived in Pakistan
- I am a researcher
- I have a career to think about
- I want to support greater equality of education
- ...

It is notable that, from the students’ perspective, only some of these points of context are likely to overlap with mine. The students have also lived in Pakistan, though even on this point, their experience of living in Pakistan is likely to have been rather different from mine. In the case of speaking English, the two students are viewed by their school as learning English as an additional language (EAL). They are also children. Again, then, their experience is likely to be quite different. Clearly, I am stressing points of difference here, to highlight the issues of interpretation I am raising. I also have much in common with the students; if I did not, communication would be impossible.

From my perspective as a researcher, the factors listed above all, to some extent, shape what I am able (or willing?) to say about the data. My experience of discursive practices associated with Asian identity, for example, is likely to be very different from that of the students involved in my research. Furthermore, I am here introducing the notion of ‘Asian identity’, a notion which may have more significance as an analytic category for me as researcher, than it does for Zeb and Afzal. As researchers drawing on conversation analysis regularly observe, identity categories are not fixed labels which drive participants’ behaviour. They can be seen, instead, as discursive resources which participants deploy in the course of their social life (e.g. Schegloff, 1992; Antaki, 1994).

And furthermore again, in producing any account of an investigation of Asian identity (even from a strong CA position), say, *readers* of that account will bring their own histories to their interpretation. There is therefore, also a reflexive interface between the researcher and the consumers of their research. The whole process of doing ethnographic research thus entails living in a world of reflexivities. Every aspect of the process of data collection and analysis

entails interdependences between the researcher, participants and the texts they produce. In the case of the above extract, the students' work, the recording of their interaction, the preparation of a transcript, and the various ways in which that transcript is analysed, written about, read about or otherwise deployed (such as for a LEF workshop) are all reflexively produced.

If we inhabit a world of reflexivities, does that have implications for the way we do our research? Not necessarily; from the above argument, even the most positivist research can be seen as reflexive. As ethnographers, however, we are concerned with participants' meanings, with the emic perspective, as Janet Maybin stresses. We bring to our ethnography, however, the interests (including in the political sense) and commitments of our earlier selves, as Ben Rampton illustrates for researchers coming from a teaching background. The emic perspective is therefore partly a reflection of ourselves. I think most ethnographers would accept this point. I am interested, then, in how we reflect this in our work, in how we write ourselves more explicitly into our research texts. In particular, I am interested in how we write ourselves into our analyses, for, as I argued above, these analyses are as much about ourselves as about the data.

This last point is discussed by Speer (2002) in the context of feminist approaches to research. She argues that conversation analysis offers one set of tools with which to avoid a pretence of objectivity and maintain a voice for both participants and researcher. In particular, conversation analysis challenges researchers "to develop an analytically grounded approach...and to attend to exactly how our methods are shaping our data" (p. 799). Thus, in collecting and analysing data to investigate identity issues, for example, CA is as much concerned with how the *researcher* orients to such categories in that process, as with the identity work of other participants. Speer therefore sees CA as producing research which is less about the participants than about the interaction *between* researchers and participants (p. 798).

Is there something in these ideas for the work of linguistic ethnographers in educational settings? Ethnography is in part, research by 'hanging out'. Many wonderfully written ethnographies involve a strong authorial voice and narratives of participation. How, though, is the researcher's presence to be taken further, as a presence which positions participants, for example, and as an observer with a perspective which is implicated in *producing* the interaction and interpretations which are reported? I do not wish to suggest that there are simple resolutions to these questions. Should I, for instance, preface each analytic statement with 'as a middle-class, university educated white British male, I observe that...'? (I have recently been working in South Africa, where this opening is often sensible.) And as Speer points out, it is perhaps not enough to preface the research report with a personal statement by the researcher of the perspective they bring. The research also needs to show *how* that perspective is implicated in the production of the research, from data collection to analysis. For this to be possible, we need to be as much ethnographers of our own practice and those of our research communities, as we do of our research 'sites', since we are ourselves part of the context. The papers in this colloquium can be seen as examples of this ethnographic work.

As a concluding point, let me consider how a recognition of reflexivity might influence ethnographic research in education. How these issues are tackled depends in part of what the research is for. Research in educational settings is often ultimately about developing practice in some way. Such research can therefore be seen as having a reflexive relationship with practitioners in some way. Thus, interpretations of data, as well as of reports of research, are

mutually constituted by researcher, practitioner and text (whether written or through other modes). For me, in working with practitioners (and the same argument applies to other interlocutors) my task is not to inform them of my findings and offer 'implications for practice'. Rather, my task is to offer situations, observations, questions, and an invitation to reflect through these offerings on their own practice. 'Here is something, which I, from my perspective, found interesting or challenging. How does this something compare with your own experience? What of this relates to your own practice'. In short, such writing is again about the interaction *between*, in this case, researcher and the consumers of their research.

To summarise, I have raised a number of issues and questions relating to the interface between research and researched. I have suggested that this interface is complex, involving a reflexive relationship between researcher, texts and participants throughout the research process. This position has implications for how we conduct our research. I have discussed some possible ways of dealing with these implications, in particular the idea that the focus of our research be on the interaction *between* researcher and participants, whether at the stage of analysis or of presenting the work to others. Such an approach implies that we need to be ethnographers of our own practices and our research communities.

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